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Science and Humanity

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> If there is any talk about the interests of Science,
> say for me that Science can go to Hell.
>
> —Alfred Kroeber,
> arguing against conducting an autopsy on the body of Ishi[1]

The Genographic Project is a fantasy of an idea. It represents the instinct of humankind to seek to understand ourselves, right down to the smallest pieces of our essential being. To follow this longing for knowledge is to be in the company of every great explorer that has ever been, from the first hominid moving beyond the boundaries of African Eden to the intrepid women, men, and children who sailed the seas beyond the mainland of Southeast Asia to become the first occupants of the continent of Australia, to the men and women perhaps not yet born who will seek to land on and inhabit planets other than this one. Such journeys reveal ways of relating to new worlds and, in that process, instruct us in new ways of being human. As another great journey of exploration, this search within ourselves may teach us equally as much. To be certain, none of our journeys thus far have been without hardship, and it is naive to think that this or any exploration is free from challenges.

I have deliberately used metaphors that relate to exploration because it is in the context of exploration and colonization that I would like to consider this project. It is common to see papers today that refer to postcolonial states, but this implies that we have learned from our history. A Native American in the twenty-first century may be told that she is living in a postcolonial era, but she still may encounter the use of racial slurs for sports mascots, view human remains of people like herself on exhibit in major museums, and be continually reminded of her people's invisibility when almost everyone assumes that she must be Hispanic. Although most Native Americans no longer need fear forced sterilization, deliberate introduction of deadly disease, or outright mass murder, the effects of the colonial era linger, most poignantly in the ways in which Native peoples often approach scientific research

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with a wariness derived from a long history of having been nothing more than specimens to the researchers. The Genographic Project must not follow in the long line of colonialist behavior camouflaged as science.

My work in the field of repatriation has allowed me to review some of the worst of human behavior that has been committed in the name of science. I have seen journal entries that describe the human remains of someone's child as "useless" unless they are stolen and sent back for scientific study. This work is challenging to both intellect and spirit, and yet the actions of those who collected bones and brains were thought to serve the same master I do. They did all of this in the interest of scientific understanding.

I've found that the analysis of human remains is rarely done with malice in mind, but when it is challenged, it is because it is done with too little regard for the rights of those who are related to the individuals being studied. My repatriation work has benefited from consultation with people who work for anatomical donation programs. It may be that some researchers do not see the parallels with those people today who donate their bodies and the process of repatriating human remains collected for a museum. I would argue that this simply illustrates the difference between being part of an indigenous group whose members are thought to be good subjects for analysis and being part of a group whose members are thought to have the basic right to decide whether or not their remains may be exhumed and examined after death.

Some of the panelists evaluated the Genographic Project with great interest and eagerness and with little idea of the reasons for opposition. I think that this may be possible only for people to whom "Tuskeegee" is simply the funny name of a town in Alabama. If one has looked only at strings of numbers as answers to solutions, one may lack the sense that they can be legacies of a colonial nation that takes the brains of young children without their parents' permission and stores them in jars neatly labeled with a set of numbers, just like all the other specimens. In the scientific process, numbers spring from the natural world and become vital parts of our process of inquiry. When the intellectual drive is perverted, numbers serve as records of human beings who are denied personal sovereignty: "Science without humanity," said Gandhi, "is a sin." What then can we make of the Genographic Project? Is it really just another in a long line of colonial actions? Is it good science? It is poor humanity? Is it possible to conduct research specifically on indigenous populations without raising fears of colonial behavior? The panelists are divided on this, and I am as well. During the panel discussion, Anne Katzenberg put it simply—"Science is a double-edged phenomenon."

When native people meet each other, it is common to discuss mutual relations and to seek to find a way in which we are related. This sense of relationship springs from shared experience and an understanding of a shared history. I do not mean to imply that any tribal history or culture is indistinct, only that a sense of community exists that seems to be absent in many non–Native American people. In my experiences of speaking with members of other indigenous communities, a

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similar sense exists. It is intriguing that this project has focused on understanding indigenous genetics. This simple description begs the question: who are the non-indigenous? Why is there not a specialized project to study those populations?

The Genographic Project focuses on a group of people who are defined in relation to their history, not according to how they might identify themselves. The term "indigenous" was a central question in the legal case surrounding the Ancient One (also known as Kennewick Man—eds) , and it is apparent that the judge listened carefully to the scientific questions that were raised regarding the aboriginality of present-day Indian tribes. That case underscores the hierarchy of what is defined as scientific truth in relation to indigenous truths. As panelist Debra Harry noted, "One of the problems that we have is that any findings that come out of the scientific community can be used politically against us." The weight of scientific authority nearly always overrides indigenous identification, and whether or not the outcome is deliberately destructive, in many cases real damage occurs.

As Daryl Pullman noted, it is important to understand just how genetic information might be applicable to a sense of identity. I am not convinced that genetic identity plays any role in the cultural identity of a native person. The Genographic Project purports to be able to tell Indigenous peoples who we are, but the idea of an outsider being able to tell us who we are is, and has always been, laughable. Anthropologists have used this line before, as have historians and government officials. None of these so-called authorities have ever understood that there is no way that any kind of science can override the identities that come from thousands of years of living in a singular location among a distinct community.

The truth is that one really only gets to be indigenous if one's ancestors were colonized. By identifying the subjects of the research to be indigenous peoples, the Genographic Project automatically sets itself up within the historical framework of colonization. The descriptive text on the project's web page is disconcerting:

> In a shrinking world, mixing populations are scrambling genetic signals. The key to this puzzle is acquiring genetic samples from the world's remaining indigenous and traditional peoples whose ethnic and genetic identities are isolated.
>
> But such distinct peoples, languages, and cultures are quickly vanishing into a 21st century global melting pot.[2]

This description of indigenous people as *vanishing* is all too familiar to Native Americans. We were once defined as vanishing; in reaction, anthropologists struggled to scientifically acquire information about our communities. In this process, human remains and sacred objects were removed often with little regard for whether or not this was the ethical thing to do.

As a Native American scientist, I firmly believe that good can come from studying Native American human remains, and I am excited by the potential knowledge that can come from the Genographic Project. As a Native American, I am also fearful that once again people like me who choose to participate in this project will unwittingly become specimens. Perhaps the most important warning that this

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project can take forward is the same lesson some archaeologists learned from repatriation. Scientific projects affecting indigenous communities that are undertaken without consultation and consent are unethical. Communities now have the power and the will to require ethical scientific practice. It is no longer possible to conduct research as one would in the colonial past. Science without humanity is not just a sin, it is unethical too!

The Genographic Project could be a wonderful thing. The idea that we can understand relationships between different communities through genetic testing is one more scientific adventure. It is similar to others on which we have already embarked, but because we now know better, we must prepare carefully for this endeavor.

ENDNOTES

1. Letter of A. L. Kroeber to E. W. Gifford in *Ishi the Last Yahi*, edited by Heizer and Kroeber, 240.
2. The Genographic Project. ⟨https://www3.nationalgeographic.com/genographic/about.html⟩ accessed 4 December 2008.

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